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Critically engaging with cultural representations in foreign language textbooks

Abstract

There is currently strong recognition within the field of intercultural language teaching of the need for language learners to develop the ability to actively interpret and critically reflect on cultural meanings and representations from a variety of perspectives. This article argues that cultural representations contained in language textbooks, though often problematic, can be used as a useful resource for helping learners develop their capacities for interpretation and critical reflection. The paper draws on data collected in an English language classroom in Japan to highlight some of the ways that language learners construct critical accounts of cultural content in a language textbook, highlighting not only the content of their accounts but also the discursive strategies they use to construct them. It therefore illustrates the potential for working with imperfect materials to develop intercultural competencies.

Keywords: language, textbook, culture, representation, stereotype, reflection

Introduction

In the current age, individuals from a wide range of backgrounds make use of one or more foreign languages for carrying out activities and managing interpersonal relationships with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in an array of political, social, and professional contexts. This complex reality presents a challenge to the field of foreign language teaching, as it forces us to perpetually reflect on what it really means to effectively use a foreign language within the context of intercultural communication and how the language learning experience might be engineered to prepare learners for such experiences. A strong theme in recent work on intercultural language learning is the importance of developing learners' capacities for interpreting and reflecting on how culture influences meaning-making processes, as well as how cultures are represented in various forms of discourse (e.g. Baker 2015; Kearney 2016; Kramsch 2009; Liddicoat & Scarino 2013; McConachy & Hata 2013). Such an

emphasis stems from the increasing influence of non-essentialist perspectives on culture in language teaching, which recognize that any cultural grouping naturally embodies diversity in behaviors, ways of thinking, and values (Hannerz 1992; Holliday 2011). In contrast to the previous tendency to treat national cultures as static and homogeneous, culture is now increasingly conceptualised as a site of discursive struggle – a site in which various individuals and groups compete to define particular behaviors and values as normative (Kramsch 2009). As Dervin (2014) points out, not all salient behaviors and values within a group come to be elevated to the status of “culture”. Any notion of culture is therefore constructed as an outcome of processes of inclusion and exclusion.

For language learners, the task is to develop the ability to observe and interpret cultural behaviors, to seek multiple (and, at times, conflicting) perspectives on behaviors, and to compare behaviors, meanings, and cultural discourses across languages and cultures (Abdallah-Preteille 2006; Liddicoat & Scarino 2013; McConachy Forthcoming). This means that learners are ultimately responsible for making sense of the cultural diversity which they encounter, and therefore need to be able to monitor and question one’s own sense-making processes in an ongoing process of learning. The immediate questions for language teachers are 1) how classroom experiences can be used to help learners develop their abilities to engage with aspects of cultural diversity in a critical and insightful way, and 2) what this critical engagement would actually look like in practice. This paper argues that helping learners engage in a critical way with cultural representations in language textbooks can be a useful and important activity in the classroom, particularly considering the fact that textbooks very often construct overly simplistic notions of culture and cultural difference (Canale 2016). It presents data from an English language classroom in Japan to show some of the ways that students problematise textbook content in written reflections.

Textbooks as a Resource for Critical Engagement in the Classroom

Since the communicative turn in language teaching, an increasing number of foreign language textbooks have come to incorporate descriptions of foreign cultures with the intent of stimulating interest in the language and facilitating intercultural understanding. However, as has been discussed in previous research, descriptions tends to be rather simplistic, ethnocentric (Kramsch 1987), and assume homogeneity amongst users of a language (Liddicoat 2002; Ren & Han 2016). It is not uncommon to find culture framed exclusively in terms of national cultures and reduced to stereotypical characterizations which are presented as though they are facts (Risager 1998; 2007). Although textbooks

do not always present cross-cultural comparisons, when they do they tend to invoke an “objectivist-differentialist” logic (Dervin & Liddicoat 2013), according to which cultures are not only different but irreconcilably different. This often takes the form of binary division of national cultures into categories such as “individualist”/“collectivist” or “high-context/low-context”, with such categories constituting the primary explanatory frame for individual behaviour (Holliday 2010). As one example, an English language textbook designed for the international market might advise learners that Japanese people value an “indirect” or “polite” communication style stemming from a cultural preference for “harmony” in social relations (see McConachy & Hata 2013 for a specific example of this). Such a macro perspective treats communicative tendencies such as indirectness or politeness as reflecting the inherent nature of a group of people rather than sociocultural resources that are naturally subject to contextual and individual variability. Juxtapositions with other national groups such as “Americans”, who tend to be “direct”, function to illustrate the inherent differences of groups and therefore construct a cultural gap that needs to be bridged, lest the individual be involved in a “culture clash” (Hannerz 1999).

Compounding the problem of cultural content is the fact that textbooks themselves rarely encourage learners to critically reflect on what has been presented (Shin, Eslami & Chen 2011). As discussed by McConachy (2009), textbook questions tend to be structured in order to elicit learners’ comprehension of information rather than encourage them to analyze and reflect on sociocultural content from multiple perspectives. There is a distinct lack of prompts for learners to consider how aspects of one’s own and others’ cultures might be variably interpreted, within and beyond the framework of the nation. This presents a problem because learners may attribute an undeserved authority to the content and thereby remain unduly accepting of what is written (Canale 2016). There is thus a considerable impetus for foreign language teachers to structure opportunities for learners to critically examine the nature of the cultural representations they are exposed to in language textbooks. It is important for language learners to be given regular opportunities to explicitly look at what aspects of culture are represented and how the behaviors and values of cultural groups are described, while reflecting on the extent to which any cultural generalisation may or may not be valid (c.f. Baker 2015). This involves both interpretation and reflection. Interpretation is a matter of consciously attributing meaning to what is presented, while reflection is a process of trying to reconcile informational content with what one currently knows about the world, considering its value from a range of ontological,

aesthetic, political, cultural etc. perspectives (Moon 2014). Reflection takes on its most overtly ‘critical’ orientation when learners are able to articulate a clear and supported stance on the value or legitimacy of cultural content (Byram 1997; Houghton 2012). Particularly important in such a process is reflection on auto-stereotypes (stereotypes of one’s own (national) culture) and hetero-stereotypes (stereotypes of other cultures), where they come from, and to what extent they actually resonate with the experiences of the learners themselves. Of course, it cannot be assumed that learners’ own perceptions will automatically be more informed or accurate than the content of the textbook, but it is nevertheless highly advantageous from the perspective of intercultural learning for learners to engage with cultural representations in a considered way while honing their capacities for interpretation and reflection.

Although there is an increasing amount of research these days on the ways culture is represented in language textbooks, there is little work which documents the specific ways that students critically engage with cultural representations in textbooks, what they identify as valid or problematic, and how they articulate their understandings (Canale 2016; Kramsch 1987; Risager 2014). As Canale (2016) points out, those who engage with a text “do not just decode pre-established meanings; they may become agents in the process of reinforcing, appropriating or contesting the representations textbooks (re)produce” (p. 226). It is therefore important to know more about how language learners interpret the cultural representations they are exposed to and how they engage their critical faculties in the process of reflection. This paper takes this gap in knowledge as its point of departure and presents an analysis of the ways that a small group of Japanese learners of English articulate what they identified as problematic representations of culture in a popular English language textbook used in the Japanese context.

Research Context and Description of Data

The data comes from a 13-week content-based English course for students of upper-intermediate to advanced ability at a prestigious national university in Japan. The primary purpose of this course as determined by the institution was to develop students’ speaking and listening skills through engagement with reading materials and mini-lectures in the teacher’s area of expertise. In this case, the theme of the class was centered on the relationships between language and culture in the English and Japanese languages. Although a particular textbook was not stipulated as part of the curriculum requirements, teachers were expected to assign an appropriate textbook. There is a small

selection of locally produced textbooks aimed at English language learners in Japan which explore cultural issues, often through a critical-incident approach. As a textbook genre, many of these textbooks consist of accounts of fake or real critical incidents from the authors' experiences, which are then used to illustrate alleged cultural traits and/or differences. These textbooks typically construct Westerners (particularly North Americans) as the typical 'other' in relation to which Japanese cultural behaviors and values can be elucidated and contrasted. The textbook adopted for use in this particular course falls into this genre of textbook, thematically organized around cultural differences in the broad areas of interpersonal relationships, cultural values, and communicative strategies, which are illustrated by instances of (mis)communication and the authors' elaboration of these instances in terms of underlying cultural principles. It furthermore offers practical advice on how to avoid potential misunderstandings and how to deal with them when they occur. This particular textbook has enjoyed a large degree of popularity in Japan in a range of formal and informal educational contexts. Although the textbook takes an essentialist perspective on culture, it was considered that the cultural representations contained within would provide good stimuli for critical reflection.

Participants

There were eight participants in this course, ranging from 19-21 years in age, six of which had spent several years living outside Japan. On the whole, there was a high degree of English proficiency among class members, with some students demonstrating considerably oral fluency. That more than half the class had spent an extended period of time living outside Japan makes this class somewhat atypical for the Japanese context, but it provided a valuable environment for taking up various perspectives on cultural content, as some students appeared highly capable at comparing and relativizing cultural behaviors and values (Liddicoat & Scarino 2013).

Task description

The data stems from an end-of-semester writing task in which students were required to identify limitations with the ways that the textbook adopted for classroom use represents culture and cultural differences. In the weekly sessions during the semester, there was frequent discussion of the various critical incidents contained within the textbook, though in the early weeks students did not necessarily show evidence of critical reflection. At different points throughout the semester, students were broken up into smaller groups and asked to discuss the extent to which the incidents seemed to

indicate actual cultural differences and whether or not the cultural explanations offered resonated with them. While there were times that the learners admitted the validity of the cultural analyses, there were times that some or all of the learners rejected the analyses as overly simplistic. It appeared that students were beginning to consider the possibility that the incidents within the textbook had not actually happened, but had rather been constructed in order to illustrate a pre-defined cultural difference. However, during class sessions, there is rarely enough time to develop analysis of one particular topic, and it is also a reality that some students who are less fluent find it difficult to articulate their perspectives. Therefore, the pedagogical intent of the end-of-semester writing task (ungraded) was to give students a chance to focus on what they regarded as problematic accounts of cultural difference and to articulate their reasoning for this judgment. The learners were thus instructed to identify two separate sections in which they felt the nature of the cultural analysis was potentially problematic and write a one-page description of the problem in English.

The data

As all students completed the homework assignment, there were approximately 20 pages of text overall, with most students writing slightly over a page about one incident or cultural analysis contained within the textbook. It turned out that many students had chosen to focus on the several sections of the textbook that they regarded as problematic. In order to understand the nature of students' critical engagement with cultural representations, I maintained a dual analytical focus on the specific cultural representations that students identified as problematic and the discursive strategies used to elaborate their critique. The data was therefore analyzed from the perspective of content analysis and discourse analysis (Gee 1999). Initial coding of the data functioned to identify first of all what incident or cultural analysis within the text had been chosen, the particular aspects of the textbook authors' intercultural analyses that had been signaled as problematic by students, and the reasons given for their critical stance. This initial coding revealed that although similar problems had been identified by students, critiques were justified in slightly different ways. Therefore, as the next step in the analysis, attention to the discursive construction of the critique helped shed further light on the nature of the students' critical engagement and its potential significance for intercultural learning. The data presented below was chosen to indicate the main themes that were evident in students' responses as a whole and some of the strategies used for articulating critical perspectives on textbook content.

Critiquing Ethnocentricity in the Analysis of Intercultural Encounters

One salient criticism which emerged in the students' responses was that concerning ethnocentric interpretations and evaluations of culture identified in the textbook. When presenting an analysis of a critical incident, it was not unusual for the textbook to assume the normalcy of American cultural behaviors and treat Japanese cultural behaviors as the cause of intercultural problems. This was explicitly picked up on by students.

(S1) The author describes the cultural difference from only one side, creating biased understanding of cultural differences. For instance, in Chapter 2, she describes the situation in which she felt rejected because she was alone at the back seat of a car when 2 Japanese staffs were in the front seat. The author claims that Americans usually show their respect to the guests of honor by being friendly and sitting close to them. Because of this expectation that the Americans have, she felt lonely when the Japanese staffs did not sit with her in the car. However, her description may be problematic since it implies that the cause of her unpleasant feeling is found in the behavior of Japanese staffs, although in reality it is found in both sides. It leaves an impression that Japanese way of showing respect is different from her standard and is regarded as "strange". It seems that in this situation the author identifies the Japanese as the source of blame.

In her analysis above, S1 is problematizing the way in which the textbook has used an account of the writers' personal experience to illustrate alleged cultural differences. The nature of the problem articulated by S1 here is that the reader is left with the impression that the negative emotion experienced by the American author in interaction with the Japanese men was "caused" by *their* cultural behavior. S1 has problematized the way the author seems to be assigning blame solely to her interlocutors without also recognizing the influence of her own cultural conditioning on her emotional responses to the interaction. In essence, the student has pointed out how the author has used cultural difference as an excuse in order to deflect away from her own responsibility (Dervin 2011). The issue of responsibility for outcomes in intercultural communication, including misunderstandings or strong emotional reactions, is a particularly important one and the tendency for speakers to ascribe blame to one's interlocutor is well recognized in the literature (Scollon & Scollon 2001).

A separate example of ethnocentric analysis is pointed out by S3. In one particular section, the textbook had focused on the potentially problematic use of reference terms such as “We Japanese” or “You Americans” when making cultural generalizations in interaction, something which was alleged to be common amongst Japanese people. Whilst claiming that such behaviour is rooted in Japanese collectivistic tendencies, the textbook was critical of such language use. For an American, it claims, such language does nothing but create distance between speakers by partitioning them into separate cultural groups. The textbook suggests that it is better for Japanese people to use terms such as “the Japanese” when making cultural generalizations. S3 critiques this suggestion below.

(S3) The author analyzes that Japanese have the sense of belonging to groups, while Americans think of themselves of individuals. But she fails to consider how the Western way of speaking can be considered awkward or absurd in a Japanese cultural context. She only focuses on how the Japanese culture is a problem for Americans. The author must also consider how the Western individualism can be unusual or even uncomfortable for a Japanese who places importance on the sense of belonging to a group.

Whilst not rejecting the tendency to use the term ‘We Japanese’ as a form of social deixis, S3 is somewhat resistant to the negative portrayal given in the textbook. He points out the fact that, whilst the author has identified such language use as problematic from an American viewpoint, the author has not really considered the cultural validity of such language use from a Japanese cultural perspective. In other words, what S3 has pointed out here is a lack of reflexivity on behalf of the author who has considered the way “their” language use impacts “us”, but not the way “our” language use impacts “them”. As S3 remarks, the author has treated individualism as the unmarked category against which the collectivist cultural other can be evaluated (Holliday 2010). Such a reflective analysis by S3 is indicative of a general tone that emerged in some class sessions during discussion on how best to refer to cultural groups when making comparisons. At that time, several students expressed clear discomfort with the idea that one should aim to objectify one’s primary group of affiliation by such expressions as “the Japanese” rather than “we Japanese”. They appeared to be unconvinced of the need to linguistically separate oneself from one’s cultural group. By pointing out and articulating the ethnocentric bias in the author’s perspective, S3 show understanding of the fact that ways of representing the self and one’s affiliations are

culturally variable, emotionally charged, and thus require a reflexive engagement to decenter from one's own cultural assumptions (Byram, Nichols & Stevens 2001). Both S1 and S3 indicate awareness of the difficulty associated with considering cultural phenomena (and incidents as a whole) from multiple perspectives and of finding a way to describe problems which occur in interaction from a balanced perspective. As one aspect of reflexivity the ability to interpret the meaning and assess the impact of phenomena in intercultural interaction from multiple perspectives, preferably in a non-judgmental way, is particularly important (Byram 1997). Ethnocentrism is, in a sense, the antithesis of reflexivity.

Deconstructing Stereotypical Characterizations of Culture

Another theme which emerged in the students' responses concerned certain stereotypical representations of Japanese culture presented by the textbook. Due to its tendency to attempt to explain behaviors in terms of differences in underlying cultural principles, the textbook sometimes fell into the trap of simplistic cross-cultural juxtapositions, as deconstructed by S1 below.

(S1) The author's explanation of cultural differences is often too stereotypical and sometimes unrealistic. For instance, she claims that the Americans tend to buy very exotic, unique souvenirs when they travel, while the Japanese tend to buy very unoriginal souvenirs. However, this is often untrue, since in both cultures people buy exotic souvenirs and typical souvenirs depending on the receiver of the gift. If the souvenir is for a close friend, the Japanese would also buy a unique souvenir, because they know the receiver's taste well and what kind of gift to get.

The textbook had claimed that Americans have a tendency to demonstrate their individualism by aiming to choose somehow original souvenirs as gifts, whereas Japanese people, due to their collectivism, are likely to buy something expected and easily recognizable. S1 clearly rejects the juxtaposition of Japanese and American consumer behavior by appealing to the inevitable context-dependency of action. S1 suggests that there is, in fact, no actual underlying cultural difference, as individuals from both cultural backgrounds are likely to buy a variety of souvenirs according to whomever they are purchasing them for. S1 thus appeals to a non-essentialist perspective on culture. S2 offers a similar critique below.

(S2) As for the analyses that the author had on Japanese, it is not wholly true because what souvenir to buy and whom to give it varies from individual to individual. For instance, if I chose one for my teacher at school, I would definitely try to buy a famous one. But if that were a close friend of mine, I would buy something unique and hard to find, which would take some time. It depends on the relationship that I have with each person. If I were not that close to someone, it would be strange if I bought a souvenir that is too unique because it would give an impression that we are closer than we actually are. Moreover, the recipient's age is also important in my opinion.

What is interesting in S2's response is that he utilizes a personal account as a tool for specifying the nature of context and highlighting the structure of the logic behind such decision-making, thus working to deconstruct the oversimplified account provided by the textbook. For both students, detailed description of the contextual parameters which influence choices constitutes an important tool for recognizing variability in practices and the consequences of this variation. Here, both practice and its variation in context are seen as meaningful and interpretable, which functions to break down the stereotype (McConachy Forthcoming). The following example of stereotyping addressed by students concerns the way the textbook characterizes Japanese people as commonly subordinating themselves to others and showing dependency, which the textbook suggests is embodied in greetings such as *dozo yoroshiku* (My translation: please show good will towards me). S5 takes issue with the textbook characterization.

(S5) In the textbook it wrote that "*Dozo yoroshiku*" asks for help, not for a specific help, but as a general condition and that the Japanese idea is that "I depend on you," not just in certain situations, but all the time. In my opinion, this statement doesn't make sense at all. I think there are few people who say "*dozo yoroshiku*," in order to show one's dependence on others. If I were to analyze English expressions such as "Nice to meet you" or "How are you doing?" the same way as the author did, I would say that Americans are always caring about others' condition and want to see if they are doing good by saying "How are you?" so many times. In each language, there must be some idioms which are used many times but don't actually carry the meaning that they literally have in it.

S5 strongly rejects the author's interpretation of the cultural significance of the Japanese

phrase. He believes that the author has incorrectly inferred from the conventionalized use of *dozo yoroshiku* in daily life that Japanese people are perpetually setting themselves up as subordinate to or dependent upon others. This has come about, he suggests, as a result of taking an overly literal interpretation of the utterance and the actual extent of its function as indexing dependence in Japanese social relations (Pizziconi 2009). What is of importance is the strategy which he uses for illustrating the problem with the author's analysis. By illustrating the difficulty of inferring genuine friendliness from the conventionalized use of English phrases such as "How are you doing?", he effectively points to the futility of using limited linguistic evidence to construct essentialist accounts of culture and cultural difference (Béal 1992). The construction of such an analogy requires a high degree of reflexivity by S5, not only to identify the nature of the problem through critical reflection but to be able to articulate it in such a sophisticated way. S5 has reflected not only on the nature of the problem but also as to how the problem could be illustrated from an alternate cultural perspective. It can be said that reflection from multiple perspectives has helped S5 find a way to respond constructively to what was identified as problematic. The examples in this section show the students reflecting on the nature of the stereotypes they encountered and utilizing two important tools for deconstructing the stereotypes: specification of contextual variability and the use of intercultural analogy to highlight the limitations of making simplistic inferences. These examples highlight the importance of an interpretive and reflective engagement to develop individual responses to stereotypical cultural representations.

Conclusion

The paper has argued that in the current age being able to reflect on and articulate one's stance in relation to textbook representations of culture is an important part of developing language learners' interpretive capacities for intercultural communication. The analysis presented here has shown that students primarily identified ethnocentric or stereotypical cultural representations as most problematic in the textbook under consideration, particularly when they felt that aspects of Japanese culture had been explained in a simplistic way. On the whole, the textbook in question is constructed around an essentialist perspective on culture and frames intercultural differences, illustrated through critical incidents, within an objectivist-differentialist frame (Dervin 2011). Such an orientation to culture constitutes the initial frame within which students carry out their interpretive and reflective work. When students problematize the ethnocentricity evident in the textbook authors' intercultural explanation, the focus

remains on the one-sidedness of the analysis and students do not necessarily question the essentialist logic embedded in comparisons between “Japanese” and “Americans”. However, when students’ critical attention turns more towards the stereotypical nature of cultural descriptions, they begin to highlight contextual variability and open up to variability as a constituent of reality, thereby moving more towards a non-essentialist frame for considering culture (Abdallah-Pretceille 2006). Learners’ perspectives become embodied in the ways they use language to describe culture and the externalization of perspectives through language provides a resource for responding to problematic cultural representations. In this sense, reflection is an important pre-condition for developing the ability to articulate more sophisticated accounts of the nature of cultural representation (McConachy Forthcoming).

The fact that many of these students were highly proficient in English and had substantial experience of life in other countries no doubt aided them in their identification and articulation of simplistic cultural analyses. When learners are less proficient in the target language or have less experience in reflecting on cultural phenomena (particularly one’s own national culture), there is an even more important role for the teacher in gradually helping learners become able to make sense of cultural representations for themselves. As Kramsch (1987) points out, this can be a challenge in certain contexts, as the idea of reflecting on the legitimacy of the textbook is a significantly alien concept. Naturally, teachers need to go about socializing learners into the practice of reflecting on cultural representations in a context-sensitive way. When learners may be averse to discussing their opinions about cultural content, homework tasks such as the one used in this study may be an effective option. At the same time, there is a need for teachers to be cautious so that they do not impose their own ideologies onto the students. Helping students engage in critical reflection does not mean guiding them towards the ideological position that you would like them to take. What is most important is that learners become gradually socialized into the practices of interpretation and reflection and able to construct and articulate their own positions. Such abilities are useful not simply for engaging with particular cultural representations within language learning but more broadly for engaging with various meaning-making practices and cultural discourses in intercultural communication.

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